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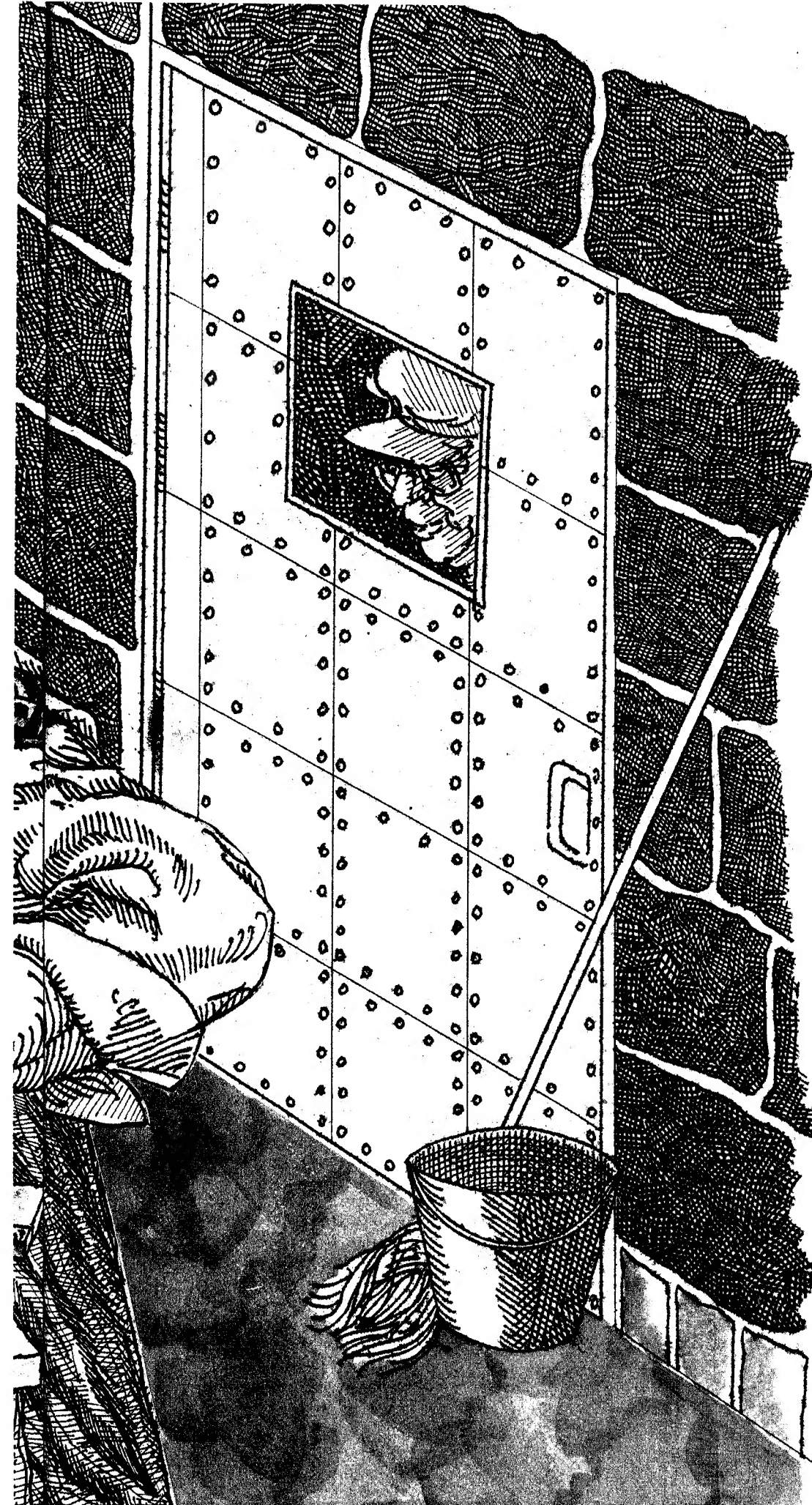
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Adam

PUSSYCAT, PUSSYCAT, I LOVE YOU. A delightful romp with the beautiful people... page 27.





Blenikov rise, smile his kindly smile and say, "I will leave you now that you may shoot yourself in private."

bon appetit, captain

by JACK RITCHIE

Major Blenikov enter my cell and place the automatic pistol on the small table. "I will give you one hour," he say. "You may write farewells and such in this time."

I regard the weapon without appetite and also Blenikov. "How many bullets does it contain?"

Blenikov's smile show his foresight. "Just one. So do not waste it on anyone else."

"But I am innocent."

He shrug. "This is immaterial. Our leaders have decided that it is time for another purge. Every regiment must furnish its quota and you are our quota."

I fold my arms. "I refuse to confess. I will not sign anything."

Perhaps his smile is meant to be kindly. "We do not need your personal signature. This we take care of ourselves. Your confession has already been approved, processed and filed."

Naturally, I am curious.

"Of what did I confess?"

"That you have been spying for the notorious Lieutenant Colonel Cedric Smith-Jones of the British Embassy."

I protest. "But no one spies for the British anymore." Then I sigh and sit down on my bunk. "Did you personally pick me as the quota?"

Major Blenikov nod. "It is not always easy to make decisions, comrade. I must sacrifice someone and you are the only bachelor captain in the regiment. Also I notice that you do not have a one hundred percent peasant background."

This is true. My father was an academician and our country's leading Gaelic scholar. Also the only one. With the accomplishment of the revolution, he fled to America. There he renew life as a short-order cook, but has since achieved a MacDonald's franchise in Milwaukee.

Blenikov put a hand on my shoulder. "Approach the matter from this direction, comrade. So you are innocent. But you are also patriotic. You

love the regime and the mother country so much that you will submit graciously to this spying charge because this will fulfill an emotional need of the people. They demand a purge now and then."

There is trueness in this, I reflect. One of the few satisfactions the recipients of a revolution can expect is to watch the gradual liquidation of their leaders.

Blenikov move toward the cell door.

I hold up a hand. "Wait. I must have a meal. A last meal."

He seem a little surprised. "With one hour left, you think of food?"

"A man must eat," I say. "Would you not, for the sake of old times, grant a condemned man one last meal?"

He consider this. "Very well. One meal. And then you will kill yourself?"

"I swear," I say. "You have my word."

He knock for the guards. "Very well, you will have your last meal."

But it must be a plain meal. Nothing exotic."

"A plan meal will be excellent," I say. "But there must be no lack of food."

When the meal is brought to my cell, Major Blenikov accompany it. He sit on my bunk. "You have one hour."

The food is a large pot of stew, quite good. And there is fresh rye bread and a bottle of wine.

It is my intention to eat and to eat and then to demand more. However, I have never in my life been one to linger at the table and I cannot change, even now. At the end of twenty-five minutes, I begin to perspire.

Blenikov look at his watch. "You have thirty-five minutes more."

I try for another five minutes and then it is obvious to me that I cannot consume another mouthful. I do, however, consume all of the wine. I sigh. "I am finished."

Blenikov rise. "I will now leave that you may shoot yourself in private."

I shake my head. "Take the gun. I will not shoot myself."

He frown. "But you promise."

"I promise to kill myself. However, I say nothing about shooting."

"What is wrong with shooting? I have always thought this is humanitarian."

"No," I say. "Not shooting. For old times sake and as comrades-in-arms, you must allow me to kill myself in my own fashion."

Blenikov consider this. "Very well. For old times sake you may choose your own way of taking your life. But immediately."

"I have already commenced."

His eyes go to the leftover food. "Ah, you have managed somehow to poison yourself?"

"No," I say. "It is not poison."

"Then what?"

I smile. "I have decided to kill myself by starving to death."

There is considerable silence.

Finally he take deep breath. "Impossible."

"It is not impossible," I say. "It can be done if one sets one's mind to it. And you have given me your word to allow me my own method of death."

He continue to glare. "Very well. I have given you my word. But we shall see if you still sing such a merry tune after you miss a few meals. I will leave the weapon here. I think you will select the bullet before not too long."

When he is gone, I lie down on the bunk and smile up at the peephole near the ceiling.

Like any other intelligent human being faced with death, I retreat as



"Are you sure there's no mistake? I'm here to try out for the part of the nun!"

far as possible, and it occurs to me that when one starves himself to death, it requires much time.

How long does it take a man to starve to death? I do not know, but I feel that I will try earnestly for the world's record.

The next morning it is not until perhaps eleven that I find myself looking forward to the noon meal and realizing that there will be none.

The day pass slowly and the night slower.

The third day of my fast, Blenikov enter my cell chewing from a sandwich. It is salami, I detect, with some garlic. The bread is rye. There is also the faint waft of butter.

I lie down on my bunk, for I feel weak.

Blenikov put three books upon my small table. "Perhaps you would like to read?"

I glance their way. They are cook-books.

Blenikov remove a wax-papered object from his pocket and it is a dill pickle.

I watch him *crunch, crunch*, so delicious.

Blenikov look casual at his pickle before he take final bite. "Of course now you wish to starve to death, but I am curious about pleasanter days. What food did you find the most attractive?"

I study him for a few moments with life-depending caution and then I say, "Salmon patties. Without even the lemon."

He regard me with awe. "You like salmon patties?"

"Someone must," I say recklessly. "Also the jowls of hogs and a large bowl of barley soup. And certainly tomato aspic in which are embedded green peas."

I sit up. "Mutton, *thick-sliced*, in cold gravy. Also selected turnips in which lingers the delicate flower of indelible ink."

He flinch, but write this down. "What kind drinks?"

I think of international mixture called the martini. I have tasted by those who feel guilty about drinking and wish to suffer penance while so doing. "Martinis," I say. "By all means." I swallow hard. "With small onions."

When Blenikov return to my cell later in the day, he is followed by two attendants who bring in food.

"All your favorites," he says generously. "We search the republic."

I stare at this collection of things. The mutton, the salmon patties, the barley soup, the tomato aspic, the martinis, the hog jowls, the turnips.

In normal times I would turn pale, but now, strangely enough, there is a

faint attraction about all of this.

I close my eyes. "If I eat this, I will be shot?"

Blenikov chuckle. "But at least you will die with a full stomach."

When he is gone, I go to my bunk and lie down. I close my eyes and clench my fists.

The salmon patties are hot and the smell lift itself in my direction. My mouth begin to water. I find myself rising like zombie. I am drawn hypnotically to the food. It appear that I am doomed.

However it is the smell of the cold mutton which save me. It strike my nostrils and I faint from horror.

When I recover consciousness, the food is gone.

In days which follow, the hunger is most excruciating and I am very weak. I try to think neutral, but my mind slip to food again and again.

Occasionally my eye wander to the pistol on the table. Once I even rise to check that it really does contain one bullet. It does and I return immediately to my bunk. It is still better to be hungry and weak.

And then something strange occurs. I awake one morning and I am not hungry. There is even euphoria, a pleasantness about lying there and leisurely starving to death.

Without the burden of a demanding stomach, my mind is free to roam the universe of thought. So I lie there and think and think and think. Also I sleep a lot.

Blenikov enter my cell again and this time he waggle a finger. "You have deceived us about food before, but you have also been talking in your sleep and we have listened."

He snap his fingers like head waiter and the cell door open again. Two attendants wheel in small tables.

There is chicken, golden brown, and asparagus, and cauliflower. There is my private enthusiasm of kohlrabi, cubed and breaded in butter sauce. There is potatoes mashed and sitting beside brown gravy. There is a platter of swiss steak in sauce and onions. There is cucumber salad in cream made pink with paprika. There is fat-lobed green pepper sections and fresh sliced tomatoes. There is half-rye fresh from the bakery. The wine is port.

The day previous, I would have thrown myself upon this and feasted. Yet now as I regard it, I am even faintly ill.

Blenikov lift a silver cover. "Ah, beef soup with noodles in which I detect the aroma of Hamburg rooted parsley."

This normally would be the camel's straw which breaks my back, but now I am not even interested. I return to my bunk.

Blenikov laugh. "I will leave you." Which he does, but I suspect he goes immediately to the peephole.

I close my eyes and doze and occasionally look at the food. It get cold and the sauces congeal and I wonder why does man stoop to eat anyway? It is a ridiculous time-consuming habit.

When I awake for the fourth or fifth time, the food is gone.

I do not know how much later or which day it is when Boris bring me Zelda.

"Zelda," I say in astonishment and greeting.

She have grey-green eyes, and when I know her three years previous, she work even on Sundays.

Blenikov frown. "You two know each other?"

She survey her fingernails. "Possibly we have met before. At a political meeting or something of that sort."

Blenikov rub his hands. "It occurs to me, comrade, that man cannot live without bread alone. Perhaps your life is not built around food? There is other things?" He go to the cell door. "I will not even be at the peephole."

This I doubt, since I know that *voyeur* is the only French word which Blenikov comprehends.

When he is gone, I regard Zelda. Previous to this moment I do not have the strength to walk across the room. Now, however, I am renewed. Perhaps it is the adrenelins.

"Zelda," I say, "I have not seen you for years."

"I have been rehabilitated," she say. "Except for tonight. I now indulge in productive labor. I wear a uniform and work in the state fish hatchery."

Zelda wear a silver tight dress which she full-fill admirably.

"This is a uniform?" I ask.

She run hand along her hip. "I have worn this for years. It is now approximately five pounds too tight."

"Vive le five pounds," I say in a burst of international good will. I also reflect that when a man is starving, he does not have time for seduction, even if this require only two minutes. "Damn the peepholes," I say, "Full speed ahead."

She hold up a hand. "Not so swiftly. I am not a mindless plaything. Could we not have something to eat first?"

"Ha," I say bitterly. "You are just like the rest."

She stroke me on the cheek. "What is so wrong with eating something? Do you not remember that quaint little American cafe on Kimirsky street where they served this exotic ground beef on buns with a pickle in the middle?"

"Ah, those were the days," I say.

She nod. Then glance up at the peephole and make a correction. "But today things are better. Before the revolution I could not distinguish a fingerling from a minnow."

"Zelda," I say. "You have been assigned to get me to eat, is that not right?"

She concede this.

"Do you know why?"

"I was not briefed on that and these days I do not volunteer questions."

So I tell her the situation.

Her eyes flash. "But this is monstrous." She throw open her arms. "I am yours. You do not even have to eat one slice of bread."

I smile with enthusiasm. "Let us proceed before my adrenelins fail me." Then I halt in mid-air, in a manner of speaking. "Just one moment. If you yield to me without inducing me to eat something, then your mission has failed; has it not? What will be done to you?"

"I do not know," she say, "but it will smell better than a fish hatchery."

My eyes rove upon her contours and I sigh. "To tell the truth, Zelda, I am tired of starving to death. It is the most boring thing which I have done and I do not recommend it to anyone. I will now order a little thin soup and then we will resume our prerevolutionary relations."

"No," she say firmly. "I cannot allow you to eat. Either before or after. You must continue to starve. While there is life there is hope, or close to it. And do not worry about what happens to me. I can survive any regime, though some are more drab than others."

But I cannot allow this sacrifice. There is only one thing to do. "Zelda," I say, though I speak towards peephole, "I reject you."

She blink and then she understand. "You have most remarkable willpower of any man I know," she say admiringly.

That night when I sleep on my lonely bed I have desperate visions and even some ideas. In the morning I knock upon the cell door and demand to see Major Blenikov.

Finally he appear.

"Blenikov," I say. "I demand a public trial."

He scowl. "You are some kind of publicity seeker?"

I shake my head negative. "It is only that I have come to realize that I am selfish to desire just a quiet death. I must serve the state in any capacity I can and I think that this can best be done by rising in public and personally confessing to any sins the state has decided I have committed."

Blenikov think about this dubiously.

"Blenikov," I say. "I am still in the prime of starvation. I could survive weeks and weeks more. Each day I live your superiors frown a bit more, is that not right?"

He admit such.

"Then perhaps you can regain favor by suggesting a public trial?"

He rub his jaw. "I will see what can be done. There may be some merit in a public trial after all. We have not had one in years and frankly I miss them."

Blenikov come back the next day smiling. "It is arranged. My superiors think well of the idea." He put a folder on my table. "This is your confession. Put it to memory."

When he leave, the doctors enter. They examine me and make prescriptions for my resumption of food so that I do not look haggard at the trial. At first this is thin soups and vitamins.

In the days which follow my appetite returns and I am ravenous to anything brought before me.

Finally Blenikov tell me exact date of the trial.

I point toward peephole. "Is it manned?"

He shake his head. "That is not necessary, now that you are cooperative."

I smile. "When my time comes in court, I will stand up proudly and confess."

He nod approvingly.

"And also I will name my accomplice. Besides this Lieutenant Colonel Cedric Smith-Jones, I mean."

Blenikov frown and reach for the confession. He thumb through the pages. "I do not remember anything about an accomplice?"

"This is an oversight on the part of the state," I say. "It is unheard of to have a spy without an accomplice. Therefore I will name mine."

Blenikov scratch his head. "Who is this accomplice?"

I smile again. "You, Blenikov, are my accomplice."

There is silence.

"But this is impossible," Blenikov at last shouts. "I am *not* your accomplice."

"Of course not," I say. "I know this and *you* know this, but does the *state* know this?"

Blenikov begin to sweat. "Why do you do this to me?"

"For old time's sake," I say. "I wish to take someone with me when I go and I can think of none one who deserves the honor more than you."

"I have been a loyal servant of the state," Blenikov say desperately. "My superiors will not believe a word of your accusations."

"Possibly," I say. "But on the other hand there might remain some

doubt, and we *know* how the state always resolves questions of doubt. *Both* of us would be shot just to leave no room for error."

Blenikov shake a fist. "You cannot frighten me. I will go immediately to my superior and inform him of your intentions."

I wait two long days and then Blenikov appear again. He look like he has not slept in that time.

He sit down on my bunk. "I went to the colonel and told him what you planned to do."

"He believed your innocence?"

Blenikov cleared his throat. "Yes and no. But to be safe, he placed me under arrest." Blenikov wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. "At this point I lost my head and announced that I too would confess and name the colonel as *my* accomplice."

Blenikov reached for the glass of water on the table. "This causes the colonel to rush to the general to deny everything. The general listens and then arrests the colonel. The colonel then proclaims that when he is forced to confess, he will name the *general* as his..."

Blenikov wave a hand. "This go on and on and up and up, arrests and threats to confess, through echelon up to the very presidium itself. I understand it was noisiest meeting in our history, with everyone threatening to name everyone else as his accomplice."

Blenikov drink the water. "After much shouting, at last the coolness of heads prevailed. It was decided to untangle the situation by un-arresting everyone, all the way down the line. Forgive and forget is the theme. At least for the time being."

He look at me. "Everyone is un-arrested. Including you. You are a free man."

I blink. "Free?"

"Yes," Blenikov say. "It is decided to erase everything to the beginning and you are the beginning." He sigh heavily. "The entire matter of purge quotas is being restudied. I do not know whether this will all end for the good or the bad."

I do not know either. But I have had enough.

When I leave the prison I shall carefully reestablish my connections with Lieutenant Colonel Cedric Smith-Jones at the English Embassy.

I have worked hazardly for the British for years and I think it is now about time that I claim my promised reward and am smuggled out of the country.

Also I think that I will take Zelda with me. 